



## Safety Belts and African Americans – 2003 Report

The African American population is expected to increase by 13 percent by 2010 which will significantly increase their exposure to traffic crashes and fatalities.<sup>1</sup> Safety belt use has important implications for the preservation of African American health and safety. Clearly, expanded efforts are needed to increase safety belt use within the African American community.

### African Americans Are At Risk

- Safety belt use among African Americans increased from 69 percent in 2000 to 77 percent in 2002 – an 8 percentage-point increase in just two years. Despite this progress, however, almost one out of every four African Americans still do not buckle up on every trip.<sup>2</sup>
- Motor vehicle crashes are the leading cause of death for African Americans from birth through 14 years of age. Crashes are the second leading cause of death for African Americans between 15 and 24 years of age.<sup>3</sup> Increasing safety belt and child safety seat use will help reverse this trend.
- A 1999 study by Meharry Medical College, an historically black medical institution, reported that 100 percent safety belt use among African Americans could save 1,300 lives and prevent 26,000 injuries each year.<sup>4</sup>
- Meharry's report prompted the formation of the Blue Ribbon Panel to Increase Safety Belt Use Among African Americans in June 2000. This panel was created when Meharry partnered with the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) to invite distinguished members from the medical, academic, legal, business, religious, athletic, law enforcement, and civil rights communities to identify strategies to increase belt use among African Americans.
- Recommendations by the panel were published in December 2000; among the recommendations were stronger safety belt laws to encourage more African Americans to buckle up.<sup>5</sup>
- Another recent medical study examined motor vehicle fatality exposure rates and found that, although African American and Hispanic male teenagers travel fewer vehicle miles than their white counterparts, they are nearly twice as likely to die in a motor vehicle crash.<sup>6</sup>

### Safety Belts Save Lives And Dollars

- Safety belts saved over 12,000 American lives in 2001. However, during this same year, nearly two-thirds (60 percent) of passenger vehicle occupants killed in traffic crashes were unrestrained.<sup>7</sup>
- Research has shown that lap/shoulder belts, when used properly, reduce the risk of fatal injury to front-seat passenger car occupants by 45 percent and the risk of moderate to critical injury by 50 percent. For light truck occupants, safety belts reduce the risk of fatal injury by 60 percent and moderate-to-critical injury by 65 percent.<sup>8</sup>
- Safety belts should always be worn, even when riding in vehicles equipped with air bags. Air bags are designed to work with safety belts, not by themselves. Air bags, by themselves, have a fatality-reducing effectiveness of only 12 percent.<sup>9</sup>
- Safety belt use saves society an estimated \$50 billion annually in medical care, lost productivity, and other injury related costs.<sup>10</sup>
- Conversely, safety belt non use results in significant economic costs to society. The needless deaths and injuries from safety belt non use result in an estimated \$26 billion in economic costs to society annually.<sup>11</sup> The cost of unbuckled drivers and passengers goes far beyond those killed and the loss to their families. We all pay—in higher taxes and higher health care and insurance costs.

## Child Safety Seats/Booster Seats Help Protect Children

- In 2001, there were 497 passenger vehicle occupant fatalities among children under five years of age in the United States. Of these 497 child fatalities, where restraint use was known, 242 children (or 49 percent) were unrestrained.<sup>12</sup>
- Research on the effectiveness of child safety seats has found them to reduce fatal injury for infants (less than 1 year old) by 71 percent and toddlers (1-4 years old) by 54 percent in passenger cars. For infants and toddlers in light trucks, the corresponding reductions are 58 and 59 percent, respectively.
- All children who have outgrown child safety seats should be properly restrained in booster seats until they are at least 8 years old, unless they are 4'9" tall. Children are large enough for a lap and shoulder belt when they can sit against the vehicle seat back cushion with their knees bent over the vehicle seat cushion.
- To avoid injuries from air bags, children 12 years of age and younger should be appropriately restrained in the back seat. However, a recent survey showed that 42 percent of minority children (of which African Americans were a part) were at greater risk of air bag-related injuries because they were more frequently placed in the front seat of vehicles with front passenger air bags. By contrast, 15 percent of white children were improperly placed in the front seat of these vehicles.<sup>13</sup>
- Adult safety belt use is an important predictor of restraint use among children. Observations conducted in 2002 showed that if a driver is wearing a safety belt, young children are also restrained 92 percent of the time; however, if a driver is not wearing a safety belt, young children are restrained only 72 percent of the time.<sup>14</sup>

## Stronger Laws Can Make a Difference

- There are two types of safety belt laws: primary and secondary. Primary (standard) enforcement allows a law enforcement officer to stop a vehicle and issue a citation when the officer simply observes an unbelted driver or passenger. Secondary enforcement means that a citation for not wearing a safety belt can only be written after the officer stops the vehicle or cites the offender for another infraction.
- Primary safety belt laws have a proven track record of increasing safety belt use. Primary safety belt laws are much more effective than secondary laws, because people are more likely to buckle up and place their children in child safety seats when there is the perceived risk of receiving a citation for not doing so.
- In June 2002, the average safety belt use rate in States with primary enforcement laws was 11 percentage points higher than in States without primary enforcement laws.<sup>15</sup> (Safety belt use was 80 percent in primary law States versus 69 percent in States without primary enforcement.)
- Primary safety belt laws are effective in increasing safety belt use among African Americans. Several studies have shown that safety belt use among African Americans is significantly higher in primary enforcement areas compared to secondary enforcement areas.<sup>16, 17</sup> Higher safety belt use translates into lives saved and injuries prevented.
- In a recent National survey, 94 percent of African Americans expressed support for laws requiring front seat passengers to wear safety belts and 68 percent of African Americans expressed support for primary safety belt laws.<sup>18</sup>

## Differential Enforcement

- The issue of a law enforcement officer stopping a citizen based purely on race or ethnicity, known as differential enforcement or "racial profiling," has recently become an issue in traffic safety. While NHTSA supports the enactment of primary safety belt laws among the States, NHTSA strongly opposes any form of enforcement that uses race or ethnicity as a criterion for stopping a motorist. NHTSA continues to work with the Department of Justice to develop and promote best practices for conducting fair, professional traffic stops.
- NHTSA also continues to work with its State and community public safety partners to ensure that traffic stops are made for legitimate law violations. NHTSA encourages law enforcement agencies to adopt policies, management practices, training, and community outreach efforts to eliminate differential enforcement.
- The National Organization of Black Law Enforcement Executives (NOBLE), the nation's leading organization of minority law enforcement executives, recognizes the senseless tragedy of African Americans dying in crashes due to the lack of safety belt and child safety seat use. As a result, NOBLE has voiced support for educational outreach to the African American community and the passage of primary safety belt laws to increase safety belt and child safety seat use among African Americans.<sup>19, 20</sup>

- When Louisiana, California, Georgia, Maryland, Oklahoma, and the District of Columbia upgraded their laws to primary enforcement statutes, minority groups thought their chances of getting a safety belt ticket would be higher than for whites. However, research showed no changes in ticketing patterns by race that would suggest minority groups received a greater proportion of tickets as a result of primary laws being enacted and enforced. After the upgrades, citation data showed that there was either no difference in non-white versus white ticketing, comparing secondary to primary enforcement, or a greater increase in ticketing went to whites following the change to a primary enforcement law.[21](#), [22](#), [23](#), [24](#)

## **African American Organizations Show Strong Support For Safety Belt Laws**

Many organizations representing African Americans have partnered with NHTSA to help increase safety belt and child safety seat use among African Americans because they know that by doing so, thousands of lives will be saved and millions of injuries will be prevented. Such organizations include:

- Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc.
  - Black Congress on Health, Law, and Economics
  - Black Entertainment Television (BET)
  - Congress of National Black Churches
  - Edward Davis Education Foundation
  - Jack and Jill of America
  - Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity
  - Meharry Medical College
  - National Association for Equal Opportunity in Higher Education
  - National Black Alcoholism and Addictions Council, Inc.
  - National Black Caucus of State Legislators
  - National Black Child Development Institute
  - National Black Nurses Association
  - National Conference of Black Mayors
  - National Council of Negro Women
  - National Dental Association
  - National Medical Association
  - National Organization of Black Law Enforcement Executives
  - National Urban League
  - Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority
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